

De-Homogenising Poverty in the Southern Suburbs of Beirut: When Citizenship Disempowers

Estella Carpi¹

Abstract

Refugees in Lebanon have always occupied the lowest level of the Lebanese social pyramid, not accessing most public services and not even being legally recognised as such. Citizenship, however produced within a wavering and corrupted state system, seems to be the only tool guaranteeing basic services from the refugee perspective. The present paper shows how, in some cases, it is citizenship rather than refugee hood to prevent the vulnerable from accessing any assistance regime in Lebanon. The present urban governance of Dahiye and its partial economic empowerment following wars ended up obscuring the increasing demographic diversification of the territory and a consequent phenomenon of diversified poverty. Such new exclusion and inclusion lines have hardly ever been studied hitherto. The new excluded groups inhabiting Dahiye are made up by new and older refugees, worker migrants, Lebanese Shiites not politically affiliated or not directly hit by wars. In this framework, a kind of urban poverty, neither connected to the political violence of regional wars nor to the refugee regime, will be investigated. While refugee poverty and worker migrant poverty became the only interpretative lens of the outsider to explore vulnerability in Lebanon, in that they exemplify Lebanese institutional laxity, the citizen poverty of the Beirut southern suburb of Hay al-Gharbe will provide a further perspective.

¹ Department of Sociology and Social Policy, the University of Sydney, Abu Dhabi Plaza Hotel Apartments, Najda St. corner of Electra St., P.O. Box: 52588, Abu Dhabi, UAE.
Email address: estella.carpi@sydney.edu.au, ph.: +971 505011867.

1. Introduction

The homogenisation of a desolate and miserable Dahiye² has often overshadowed the different causes of local chronic poverty and the emerging forms of exclusion not merely triggered by regular migration flows, refugee crises or economic structure, but rather by political issues which keep going unaddressed at a domestic and international level. The 2006 reconstruction of Beirut's Dahiye - monopolised by the Waad project designed by the Iranian born NGO Jihad al-Binaa, a quick and successful re-constructor in the areas directly affected by the July war, more politically represented by Hezbollah - has surely left unaddressed those southern suburbs of Beirut suffering from chronic vulnerability and generally constituting politically anonymous spaces. These Dahiye neighborhoods, like the illegal settlement of Hay al-Gharbe - object of analysis in my field research over 2012 and 2013 - have not in fact been target of military attacks and, therefore, have never been declared in a "state of emergency".

2. Hay Al-Gharbe: Migrations, Political Non-Affiliation and Chronic Marginalisation

Hay-Gharbe is an illegal settlement bordering the Palestinian camp of Shatila and the ex camp of Sabra³ - now simply called *tajammu'*, "settlement" - under the municipality of al-Ghobeiry, which is administered by the main Shiite Lebanese party Hezbollah. The borders of this settlement are not merely physical, but also connected to community identities. In fact, its configuration changed during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) because of the inhabitants' migration to the current stadium Camille Chamoun (*al-medina ar-riadiyya*), as a result of the frequent bombing of the Palestinian camps and the fightings between different factions.

In order to renovate the stadium in 1992, the occupants, erstwhile inhabitants of Hay al-Gharbe, were evicted and returned to the settlement.

² Dahiye, considered the "periphery" *par excellence* in Lebanon, was named as such in 1982 after being called the "belt of misery" - *hizam al bu's* - in addition to Southern Metn. It is the area located between the agro-industrial area of Choueifat and the municipality of Hadath, which is still a Maronite Christian majority district (Harb, 2006: 199).

³The two Palestinian camps are becoming notorious internationally because of the massacres perpetrated by the alliance Israeli-Falangist in September 1982 during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990).

The latter has always been distinguished by the Shatila camp for its varied urban composition, in addition to the fact that the residents often expressed their refusal to be associated with the Palestinian refugee camp, frequent target of attacks by various political forces, and therefore placed under the spotlight of international politics.

In particular Sunni residents, who, fearing a long-lasting conflict in 2006 or a sharpening of violence in the Shiite-Sunni clashes in 2008, had moved away from the area and then returned there later at different times, unable to settle elsewhere in the Lebanese capital (Das and Davidson, 2011).

The majority of Hay al-Gharbe's residents are Dom (72%), descendants of nomads who populated the courts of India between the 3rd and the 10th centuries, and who are now located in the Middle East. Besides, the settlement is inhabited by Palestinians who have not found an accommodation in the refugee camps; also migrant workers from Asia and Africa (especially Iraqis, Sri Lankans and Syrians) and refugees make up a sizeable percentage of Hay al-Gharbe's residents and form a marginalised sphere in the multifaceted reality of Dahiye. Therefore, only a small group is composed of Lebanese citizens. These social groups, in total 10,000 people⁴, tend to isolate themselves and avoid any interaction with one another⁵. Most of the residents, moreover, are women and children, given that nearly 20% of men are detained in prison. Criminality is generally due to prolonged poverty and urban violence on the rise (Das and Davidson, 2011).

The abovementioned recent residents, because of the different contexts of origin and the dizzying rate of urbanisation, have never been assimilated to the urban fabric, impeding the formation of a fully integrated urban community in Lebanon.

The urbanisation of the rural immigration has paved the way to the formation of illegal settlements, the dismantling of which remains difficult in a country where the institutions are too weak and corrupt to enforce rules. The Lebanese government, for its part, has no interest in investing in the development of infrastructural areas that have proliferated illegally.

⁴ It is worth noting that the whole Dahiye where Hay al-Gharbe is located is geographically suitable to accommodate 80,000 people; however, in 1995, it was already counting 500,000 residents (Harb, 2006).

⁵ Interview with 'Abd-el-rahim, Hay al-Gharbe, October 19, 2012.

As evidence of such a feeling of social isolation, Fatma⁶, 14 years old, showed to me her unpaired shoes and exclaimed:

"I never leave the house, I find it humiliating... look at my shoes, they are unpaired and I cannot afford some new ones. I have no friends: if you hang out with them, they just talk about what they *have*. And then, I have nothing to tell".⁷

Iman⁸ is a Palestinian women holding Lebanese citizenship due to her marriage with a Lebanese. She recounted how she has always lived in Hay al-Gharbe because her family had no political connections and, consequently, could not find a job. As a result, she had no opportunity to study.

"I would like to send my children to school now, but it's a damn vicious cycle: with what money I could do it? They will die in the same way as I do: with no one being there to take care of them".

For Palestinians with no documents and not registered at UNRWA, like Iman's family during the civil war years, access to services financed by the PLO⁹ has always been problematic. It is important to notice that the only accessible aid provision for the whole family was Palestinian, and this induced Mohammed to nationally identify with the Palestinians and, at the same time, feel betrayed by the Lebanese after he was fired from the Sabra vegetables markets where he used to work until three years ago:

"The Syrians stole my job and the Lebanese bosses just wanted someone more exploitable than me. I gave the Lebanese citizenship to the whole family, but this has not changed much for us. We didn't receive an Israeli missile here in the house. And, for Hezbollah, it works this way: no physical damage caused by Israel, no help for you.

⁶ Home visit in Hay al-Gharbe, January 29, 2013.

⁷ This account, like others following, have also been mentioned in another article of mine in Italian: Carpi, E. (in press). Nuove Linee di Esclusione nei Sobborghi Meridionali di Beirut: dalla Guerra di luglio a oggi. Storia Urbana, ISSN 0391-2248, ISSN 1972-5523. Milan: ed. Franco Angeli.

⁸ Hay al-Gharbe, January 30, 2013.

⁹ The Palestinian Liberation Organisation was forced out of Lebanon in 1982. Palestinians in Lebanon are not allowed to create associations (Ministerial Decree No. 17561 of 10th July 1962); the organisations that operate for them must include Lebanese staff and be registered in the country. Therefore, after the PLO withdrawal, the services for Palestinians were not replaced by anyone, apart from the Palestinian Red Crescent Society and UNRWA.

You have to know that the families that own citizenship in Hay al-Gharbe have pledged their loyalty to local parties, by voting for them in the elections. Candidates promise to provide more affordable generators, to manage better garbage dumps, and to give good quality water¹⁰. What we would do for some good quality water! Not to have to pay for drinking water some residents literally enslave themselves to political parties... Do you see my daughter's *hijab*? She doesn't wear it because she really wants it, or because we want that... She wears it because she started losing her hair due to the salty water of the shower!".

Iman's family, half Palestinian and half Lebanese, does not embody *ad hoc* vulnerability produced by war-caused emergencies, but rather long-term humanitarianism providing assistance to the Palestinian members and, at the same time, Lebanese chronic poverty fueled by sporadic displacements during the civil war and undergoing discriminatory state policies.

Wafiq¹¹, a 40 year old Lebanese residing in Hay al-Gharbe, said to be grateful to destiny as his mother was a Palestinian, in that this ensured his family's access to the remittances of the Palestinian migrant communities:

"Thanks to this we got livelihoods to survive from the Beit Atfal as-Sumud ("The Children's House of Resistance"). Lebanese like my father never had *wasta* [useful personal connections], and so we never accessed public services, which are too expensive for us... Can you believe me? What's the use, then, of the Lebanese nationality! Here we have no drinking water, no electricity; there is only one school and a health service provider in the district thanks to few associations. Yet no national army here protects us, neither the police nor the state... Nothing at all. "

Likewise, Mohammed¹², Lebanese who led an indoor life in Hay al-Gharbe because of his extreme poverty, stated:

"I fought with Fatah ad-Dahiye in the 'war of the camps' in 1987. At that time they making many promises: 'If you fight, you will receive whatever you and your family need'. I haven't seen any improvement, any help.

¹⁰ The water in Hay al-Gharbe is currently available from the government but of extremely low quality.

¹¹ Hay al-Gharbe, January 26, 2013.

¹² February 15, 2013.

I'm just sick of seeing lies parading as revolutions and resistances. My life is so much worse now than in the years of the civil war".

Amira¹³, 13, said that after 2008 she had returned to live in Hay al-Gharbe with her parents, although

"Nothing belongs to us here. The land belongs to the municipality and they could evict us whenever they want. That's why we live locked in the house. Unless we show our face, most of us go forgotten. And the more we are forgotten, the better. There is no safety".

The invisibility of Hay al-Gharbe, even within the outskirts of Dahiye, is due both to the longstanding state neglect and the lack of interest of international humanitarian organisations, which tend to intervene in areas that are less involved in global politics.

Indeed, the non-state¹⁴ structures - massively intervened in Dahiye in the summer 2006 during the July war - have neglected instead the areas of greatest chronic vulnerability and urban poverty, but not derived from war and violence.

After the Pyrrhic victory of Hezbollah in the July 2006 war, the party reached its greatest popularity by distributing resources with no sectarian discrimination; the most heavily bombed districts of Dahiye, therefore, reached unprecedented levels of economic development (i.e. Haret Hreik and Bi'r Hassan). In fact, the new emerging class of local engineers and architects was largely employed in the reconstruction process.

Nevertheless, as the people's accounts of their everyday life I have surfaced so far show, the reconstruction engendered new local inequalities. It is meaningful that, in the eyes of the local residents, political affiliation and social networks of *wasta* seem to be the only determining factors for benefiting from any assistance regime, even in the quality of Lebanese citizens.

¹³ Hay al-Gharbe, February 10, 2013.

¹⁴ In fact, Tahaddi Association is the only non-state aid provider that consistently works in the slum. It is an NGO led by Syrian-Swiss Catherine Mortada whose work is explicitly based on Christian principles. The association is affiliated, in turn, to Terre des Hommes-Liban, created in 1976 during the civil war to provide emergency assistance to injured children (Karam, 2006: 63).

Acts of assistance and support are designed to serve the average citizen of Dahiye, ideally representing the first stage of a social contract between the citizen and the municipality and its affiliated local organisations. This contract, however, is rejected *in toto* by those citizens of Dahiye who remain reluctant in front of the hegemonic municipal project: the only one able to provide a tangible citizenship scheme.

Within the framework of a confessional political system, like that in Lebanon, the growing ethnic diversity of the area does not facilitate the affiliation of heterogeneous residents with specific political factions, which would be able, in turn, to draw international attention and provide basic services to the neighbourhood.

Hay al-Gharbe, thus, presents itself as the spectrum of the political, denouncing the aspects of neglect of Hezbollah's governmentality in the Municipality of al-Ghobeiry, where the in-door life of these people, whose face would remind others of their misery in the public space, allows the governors to get away with their negligence. Should the 2006 war have re-stratified Lebanese society, the recent lack of direct emergencies – which usually engenders a series of long-term projects - has further disenfranchised the inhabitants of this slum.

The Hay al-Gharbe case study reveals how Dahiye's spotted poverty is shaped by identity politics and not only by socio-economic matters. The fact that international humanitarianism does not intervene in places where there are no political interests is empirically confirmed by the existence – and chronic predicament - of Hay al-Gharbe.

Most of the humanitarian industry ignored the slum as much as the Lebanese state. In fact, the major reason for intervention in wartime is the state of "emergency", but it should be traced back to the political marker that a territory has; which is the first reason why war breaks out in specific places in Lebanon and elsewhere.

In this sense, both non-state and state actors are seen as neglectors of a space that is not considered humanisable, in that it resides outside of their political agenda.

With regards to this, Iraqi, Palestinian and Sudanese refugees, even if they cannot gain a legitimate status that ascertains their vulnerability in the capacity of refugees in Lebanon¹⁵, are still classified as *de facto* suitable for aid. By contrast, the Lebanese have-nots of Hay al-Gharbe whose I have reported here their voices, remain cut out of the politics of inclusion that Hezbollah increasingly seemed to foster - particularly after the July war – and of the typically discriminatory state policies. Lack of helpful ethnic, political and confessional labels and *wasta* with the governors give birth to a life of neglect.

As I will show through my conceptualisation of Dahiye, the cradle of the Resistance described as social ethics, and considering the selective nature of the Dahiye reconstruction project's success, my field research in Hay al-Gharbe confirms the continuity between urban destruction due to war, and reconstruction as a reversal of that process in hegemonic spaces. Whereas that continuity becomes disrupted when an urban district contingently lacks political attention due to a less defined social identity within the broader confessional Lebanese demography.

Hay al-Gharbe, in brief, is a checkmate to the postwar reconstruction project, which had received plenty of applauses by Shiite and non-Shiite Lebanese, owing to compensation strategies which avoided a generalised mass resentment against Hezbollah¹⁶ in the aftermath of the Israeli attacks.

3. Citizenship as a Discourse Strategy

The dominant Dahiye, already referred to as *ad-Dahiye al-mazbuta*, is well known because of the Israeli bombing that hit the area countless times in Lebanon's history. While Hay al-Gharbe is the place in which people end up residing for being unwanted and for necessity, constituting one of the microcosms of citizen exclusions in Lebanon, the part of the periphery mostly martyred by the Israeli aviation is instead a space of choice, as people's subjective will to become a civic member of Dahiye is much stronger, being these gentrified districts the only place where the Dahiye municipalities have provided basic services and entertainments (Deeb and Harb, 2010).

¹⁵ Lebanon is not in fact a signatory to the 1951 Convention for Refugees, and it is therefore classified as a transit country.

¹⁶ "Hezbollah has been smart as it has understood when exactly it was better to distribute a lot to anyone in Dahiye, as the Shiites started being very angry at the party because of such a destructive war". (Interview with Jaafar, Beirut, December 30, 2012).

Hay al-Gharbe cannot be a “space of choice” in that the inhabitants do not still have the opportunity to become subjects able to challenge the predominant narrative of class and citizenship, which contributes to the affirmation of certain social hierarchies. This happens owing to the impossibility of “public standing” (Holston, 2009), that is to say claiming legal, civic and social rights in the capacity of citizens in the Dahiye space. The residents, not owning the land, cannot even claim any right to mobilise, as urban residence is normally the basis for mobilisation (Holston, 2009).

In fact, where the public space attracts only fear of moving and humiliation, an indoor life is preferred and vulnerability remains the mainstream discourse in particular fields, such as refugehood and economic migration. In this scenario, citizenship is conceived as the mere managing of Lebanon's differences, and is enacted whenever the underlying power relations express their assertiveness.

As evidence of the decreasing assistance that politically non-affiliated citizens receive, ‘Abbas¹⁷, while we were having dinner at his place in Haret Hreik, told me: “The stuffed wine leaves you’re eating are from our yard in the South, as after the war I didn’t find any job around here... Our pockets are empty, because we know no one in politics”. Similarly, Farah¹⁸, in Bi’r al-‘Abed, was complaining about the fact that before *harb tammuz* there used to be more loans from Hezbollah for small enterprises:

“Now the cost of living has become unaffordable. Do they think we’re in Dubai? After the war, due to oil shortage, the taxi drivers raised the ride fee from 1,500 LL to 2,000 LL [Lebanese Lira]. It has never got back to how it was after then. Life is becoming impossible. I have no purchasing power”.

Despite the clear sense of territorial ownership, Ahmad, 32 years old, shop owner in al-Ghobeiry, complained about the lack of room for non-dominant ideas: “If you don’t fit the Resistance, you’re alone, on your own. They take back from you what you were given in times of war”¹⁹.

¹⁷ January 27, 2012.

¹⁸ Bi’r al-‘Abed, January 23, 2012.

¹⁹ Conversation held in al-Ghobeiry, October 13, 2011.

Similarly, a young girl in Haret Hreik²⁰ complained about the local municipalities abandoning needy people, unlike before the 2006 war:

“Now if you don’t have a martyr or an injured among your family members because of one of Hezbollah’s wars, you are screwed. They’re all charity services for particular categories, to show that the party is engaged and stuff like that...”.

A hairdresser in al-Mreije²¹, still a Christian majority district of Dahiye’s suburbs, also told me:

“Don’t fear me [laughing], I have nothing to do with these stupid masters of war ruling the area. I don’t really like them and the way they do Islam, they know your family better than yourself! They just give aid to Shiites. Also in *harb tammuz*. Anything else you hear around is propaganda. If you’re not engaged with their politics you become no one”.

In order to discuss citizenship in Hay al-Gharbe and how the fact of holding the citizen status disempowers, it is useful to mention the eternal anti-state rhetoric present in the suburbs: a rhetoric which, albeit inflated by the ruling party to gain more local consensus, is certainly produced by a long date state abandonment.

As abovementioned, the citizenship model that Hezbollah has been weaving in Dahiye at the municipal level is considered participatory, especially after the end of the Israeli occupation of Lebanon (2000). Within this framework, the notion of citizenship must be understood in terms of social contract between local citizens and the Dahiye municipalities without a more widely national implication.

This hegemonic project of territorial citizenship is chronically referred to and experienced in anti-state function, even when the boundaries between state and party are rather indefinite and changeable²².

²⁰ Interview conducted in Haret Hreik, October 15, 2011.

²¹ Al-Mreije, Beirut, October 31, 2012.

²² It is worth noting that the anti-government rhetoric used by the party remains the same also when the Lebanese Parliament is mainly led by the March 8 coalition of which Hezbollah is part. Even during the government of Najib Miqati, erstwhile Lebanese PM considered close to Hezbollah, the inhabitants of Dahiye have viewed the central government as an enemy, providing me with the idea of a government that offers “on a silver tray” their own people to the Israeli destroyer (interview conducted by the author in Haret Hreik with Intisar, Lebanese woman, November 13, 2011).

That said, the language of orthodox citizenship struggles to describe the Lebanese scenario in terms of rights and responsibilities, which should be analysed, in this case, outside of the classic patterns of the nation-state. Nevertheless, it is still a pragmatic notion of citizenship to constitute a fundamental epistemic tool to identify the new lines of inclusion and exclusion.

In Dahiye, civic sense, as forwarded by sociologist Robert Putnam (Putnam et al., 1994) – i.e. acceptance of the rights and the obligations that citizenship implies, even unofficially - is still considered as confessional by both locals and internationals; especially the residents who do not identify with the hegemonic territorial citizenship project implemented by the local governor Hezbollah.

Some of the voices that I collected in Dahiye attempt to challenge a hierarchical citizenship running along political affiliation lines, but still struggle to materialise in political actions that, in turn, could prompt the central government to expand its sphere of social justice. This is due to the fact that the socio-economic betterment of a part of Dahiye is relatively recent, and to the instability of these suburbs in their permanent exposure to local and regional conflicts.

As I have illustrated, according to people's views, social welfare is selectively improved on the basis of the political ties that every individual or family develops by joining particular social networks.

It is worth highlighting that political action is still an expression of identity rather than a mere Machiavellian strategy that is merely deployed to get benefits. Therefore, the stereotype around which the idea of Dahiye has been built throughout the decades leads to interpret identity as a political incentive, rather than a consequence resulted from certain social and economic conditions. Ultimately, abstract Dahiye categories such as "Shi'a" and "Palestinian refugees" are arbitrarily used as identifiers of neat political individualities.

The Islamic Resistance promoted by the party Hezbollah is still the predominant model of territorial citizenship, functioning as a cohesive factor of the social fabric.

The issue of the Islamic Resistance has emerged in my discussion since the research respondents have meaningfully associated economic improvement and access to services with the *de jure* citizen compliance with the official *ethos* imposed by the Dahiye governors in the public sphere. Like in any system of values and beliefs, defined in terms of social ethics, some local residents do not feel represented and therefore motivated to adhere to the ethical and political standards provided by the party. In those cases, *de facto* citizenship is suspended.

4. Conclusion

In this paper the notion of citizenship has been used as a discursive tool capable of unearthing the new inequalities of Dahiye, which have often been rendered either invisible or homogenised by old date stereotyping in the history of the so-called "belt of misery" (Harb 2006).

On the one hand, adopting the perspective of local residents, citizenship is represented as a sense of belonging and in the form of territorial claim. On the other hand, it is rather conceived as adoption of ethical values imposed from above. In this sense, a *de facto* citizenship – although here merely municipal – is held by the people who are willing to abide by Dahiye's dominant ethics. Such *de facto* territorial citizens contribute to create, so to speak, a bottom-up dictatorship of privileged individuals among the diversely definable vulnerable, and constituting, therefore, the only actual citizens within a still latent state.

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